

Heart Of A Champion

by Dannell Lites

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Summary: Even before he helped found the Legion Rokk Krinn was Cosmic Boy

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You know my name.

You've seen it a thousand times in holovids, in the sports CyberMags. You've heard it shouted from a thousand throats like thunder on the magno ball courts of Braal and Earth. Are you a magno ball fan? Do you follow the Game and those of us who played it? If so, then you surely know my name. I'll bet you think you know all about me, too, don't you?

But you don't.

Did you know that I was born right here on Earth? Ha! No, you , did you? I can see your confusion now. "But - but - " you stammer, "you're a Braalian! Only Braalians have the natural inborn ability to manipulate the electromagnetic spectrum and play magno ball without artificial aids." You're absolutely right. By heritage I'm pure Braalian stock, going back to the beginning of Braal. Family tradition says that Krinn Magar was the founder of our line. The first War Leader of Braal, Primus of the first Command Triad, winner of the first Challenge Of Korr.

Nevertheless, I was born on Earth. Brainy has yet to decide if my magnetic powers are so strong in spite of that ... or because of it. My parents Hu and Ewa Krinn came to Earth looking for work before I was born and left again when I was about six months old, so I didn't remember Earth at all when I came here at the age of fourteen.

My name is Rokk Krinn and you know my name. As two time winner of the Cosmic Games magno ball championship, the fans named me Cosmic Boy long before R. J. Brande called me that and made me one of his

Legionnaires. But there was a time when no one knew my name, when no one cheered me; a time before I first set foot on a magno ball court. Bad times that I don't let myself remember very often now.

Have you ever been hungry? I mean *really* hungry - when you had no idea where your next meal was coming from? Or even if it would come at all? The kind of hunger that leaves a burning ache in your belly that won't let you sleep at night? And that's all right, because when the morning comes there still won't be enough to eat. Sometimes nothing at all. You haven't, have you?

I have.

In fact, the very first thing I ever remember is being hungry. Going to bed hungry and crying, listening to my mother's despairing voice tell me that things would be better in the morning as she rocked me. They never were. I grew up watching my parent's haggard faces, knowing that the same futile life of grinding poverty waited for me in my turn. By the time I was born, the economy of Braal had been nonexistent for about two generations. If it hadn't been for assistance from the newly formed United Planets and private sources like philanthropist R. J. Brande, we might all have starved. As it was, the government hung on by the skin of it's teeth ... but those of us like the Krinn family, at the bottom of the slag heap, were often in dire straights.

I love my little brother Pol, I do. The day he became a student at the Legion Academy was the proudest day of my life. I'd gladly die for him if I had to. But ... when he was born I was five years old and I hated him, passionately. I looked at him in his crib, staring up at me with my mother's beautiful blue eyes and my father's sharp chin and all I could see was another mouth to feed ... someone else who'd have to be taken care of. I'm deeply ashamed of that. I tell myself that I was only a kid, that I got over my resentment; that I was glad to give Pol part (or even all) of my share to see that he never knew hunger as I knew it. There was going to be one member of the Krinn family never touched by that gnawing shadow ... even if I had to die for it.

And yet ...

And yet ...

I began playing magno ball when I was barely six. It was my escape from the world around me. Before I came to the Legion, the one place I ever belonged was on a magno ball court. There I had a life that was more than just waiting for the next inadequate food dole and watching my parents slowly wither away, old before their time. There was a place for me there. There I was King. Because I was *good*, really good. Besides, as I soon discovered, if you were as skillful as I was and willing to close your eyes and ask no questions, then you could make money, occasionally. Not much and not often, but ... it was something. My folks never asked where the money came from. They couldn't afford to. I began to practice in earnest.

By the time I was ten, my head was full of dreams of triumph at the Cosmic Games and an end to my families misery. But first I'd need a manager, someone to sponsor and train me. Not very likely for a boy from the worst slum in Braal City. On Braal, at least, the world of magno ball can be a closed one. You have to be born to the life of a

magno ball player or know someone who is. I didn't know anyone and no one knew me.

Yet.

When I went looking for a manager there was only one choice, really. In those days, if you were a championship caliber magno ball player, then you were managed by Stahl Pippo, the Pip, King of the Hustlers. Flamboyant? The man was a supernova, for space sake. You couldn't turn on a holovid or buy a newsvid without seeing his homely, overstuffed face. But getting a private appointment? That was something else.

I did a ... favor ... for someone and that was my price. I wanted to see the Pip. Curtly, I was told that he could give me five minutes, that was all.

When I walked in he was eating breakfast. At noon. Resolutely, I turned away from the wonderful smells wafting off all that food. The Krinn family could have feasted for a week on what Stahl Pippo was eating for his first meal of the day. I beat back a wave of anger that threatened to drown me. My lips curled, but I didn't say a thing. Nothing.

He stopped stuffing his face long enough to look at me lackadaisically from out of his gray, almost colorless eyes. He wasn't much impressed with what he saw, I could tell.

"I dunno ... " he mused as if I weren't there and half an eiffleberry muffin disappeared into his wide mouth. "Not very big, are ya?" At my side, my hands knotted themselves into fists against my will.

"I'll grow," I grated back at him, beginning to lose my battle with fury.

"Maybe," he conceded in his grudging way, "maybe not. Hard to tell at your age." He wiped his lips, gestured at his cup and a servant swiftly filled it with warm, fragrant Earth chocolate. "Magno ball can be a rough Game, kid," he continued calmly, ignoring my bad manners with a sniff. "Do you know what color your blood is?" In silence, I rolled up my trouser leg, exposing the long jagged scar on my right leg. When a quarter hundred weight magno ball hits you, it can break bone and puncture flesh.

"*That* color," I said.

The Pip frowned. "Turn around, kid," instructed the King of the Hustlers, twirling his hand in the air. Sullen, I obeyed him. He studied me for a long time and I held my breath. Finally, he shook his head. "Sorry, kid. Can't use you," he said. "I gotta hundred others just like you. What do I need with one more?"

And that was that. Just that easily, with those simple words, he took my hope and my future away from me, condemning me to endless poverty and obscurity. Inside, something snapped. With an audible snarl of rage, I picked him up, lifting him several feet in the air.

"You're a stupid man, you know that?" I shouted at him. I shook him like a rag doll in the hands of an irate child, rattling his Terran teeth. "One of these days you're going to wish you'd been smarter,

old man! I'm going to be a champion!" I pointed to a hologram of Dryk Bron, then his most famous client, shining from one wall. "Like him! You remember that! And I don't need *you* or anybody else to make me what I am! You'll see," I vowed, "you'll see!" I released him and he fell heavily to the floor. My eyes narrowed, I stood looming over him, all five and a half feet of me at the time.

"You'll remember!" I cursed at him. "You'll remember the name Rokk Krinn!"

I was almost to the door, stalking off before his bodyguards in the next room could arrive, before I heard his voice.

"Hey, kid!" He called after me. "Krinn! Wait a minute ... "

He scrambled up off the floor with surprising agility for such a large man. Panting, he seated himself at his table again, wiping his sweating brow. Belatedly, his bodyguards stormed in but he waved them off. "You're *late*," he accused and hit the front-runner among them square in the face with an eiffleberry muffin. "You're also *fired*!" he shrieked. "Get outta here!" His gaze turned back to me and I could see the excitement shining in his bright, feverish eyes. The Pip was hot on the trail of credits. Lots of them. He could smell them.

"How did you do that?" he demanded. I blinked.

"Do what?" My tone hadn't lost any of its surliness, but he ignored that.

"Pick me up like that," he said impatiently as if he were talking to a not very clever servant. "I'm not wearing anything metal. I'm no fool. On Braal, for an Earthman like me in my business that's a good way to get yourself killed, fast. And I'm not exactly a lightweight, either. So how did you do it?"

"The iron in your blood ... I - I lifted you by the iron in your blood," I stammered like an idiot. His jaw dropped and his eyes widened.

"You lifted three and a quarter hundredweight of me by the trace iron in my *blood*?"

I nodded belligerently, he lifted his eyes heavenward and his hands assumed a prayerful attitude. "There *is* a God," he murmured, "and he's looking out for his old buddy Pippo. Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I wasn't sure what was happening but I did know naked greed when I saw it.

"C'mere, kid," invited the Pip, gesturing me to take a seat at his overflowing table. He smiled. "You hungry?" he asked innocently, already knowing the answer to *that*. I just stared at him. "Go ahead," he urged me, "dig in, then. We got a lot to discuss."

If I live to be as old as Mon-El, I'll never, ever forget the taste of that meal. I didn't even have a name for half the stuff I was eating and I didn't care. Each new taste made me dizzy with delight. I ate until I literally made myself sick. Pippo didn't even flinch. He gestured sharply and had a servant clean the carpet. "Hey," my new friend told me in a burst of generosity, "take the rest home to your

family." He snapped his fingers and two more servants began clearing the food and packing it for me. The Pip slipped an arm around my shoulders, smiling until I thought his face would collapse.

"I'm gonna take care of you from here on out, kid," he assured me. "Pippo's gonna look out for you and your folks ... Trust me ... "

And I did.

That was my first mistake.

Do you have a favorite food? I do. I love smoked, sugar-cured Serrano ham from Earth. The first time I ever tasted it was at Pippo's table, of course. "What's this?" I demanded and reached for another slice. Pippo smiled like a shark. "Ham, kid," he told me proudly, "the real thing, not a soya substitute or a vat- cloned yeast culture. That's real meat you're eating there, boy! Like it?"

For the next couple of years I kept myself sane by thinking about the taste of that ham. It was crazy. Pippo bounced me from one magno ball tourney to another all over the planet. Sometimes two, three games in a day at first. He'd hire people from one town where they'd just seen me play to come to the next town and cheer me on. Pretty soon he didn't have to spend his money ... it just began to happen. He put together a magno ball team built around me and for the first year we hopped about Braal and the Braal system like fleas on a hot griddle. I played hard but strictly by the rules. Those early games were all honest ones. I made sure of that.

Some days I could barely hold my head up, grabbing a little sleep in the back seat of a delapidated hovercar or the grav couch of a third-rate astro cruiser, speeding from one game to the next. I hardly saw my family at all. I missed Pol's Family Dedication Ceremony and his school graduation both. When next I saw my father I found myself confronting a beaten, defeated stranger who wasn't sure how to deal with a son who provided for his family when he couldn't. Only my Mom was the same. Ewa Krinn never stopped worrying about her eldest son Rokk, no matter how famous I got. I spent the first vacation I'd had in more than a year curled up asleep in my bed listening to her sing me back to sleep whenever I awoke just as she had when I was a child. It only lasted for two days but it was glorious.

"You look so tired," she murmured when I left.

But none of them, not Pol, nor Mom or Dad were hungry any more. Not ever again.

My "teammates" changed with the passing breeze or Pippo's whim, and I barely noticed. I still didn't know anyone, least of all them.

But people were beginning to know *me*, though.

And through it all I had one steady companion. With some of the very first money I ever earned on a magno ball court, I bought myself a whole Serrano ham and hung it from the ceiling of my hotel room to keep me company. I always kept it near me; whenever I liked, I could reach out and cut myself off a piece of that ham and eat it. Just because it was there. It was *mine*.

And when that one was gone, I bought another.

I celebrated my twelfth birthday at the Cosmic Games as the youngest magno ball Champion ever. After that, I thought things might slow down a bit, but ...

"We've gotta hit warp while the thrusters are *hot*, son!" Pippo cried. "C'mon, kiddo, you can do it! Just four more games this season and then you can sit out the summer season, whaddaya say? Deal?"

"Hey, I know I promised you the summer off, but this is an important game, kid! Silverale sponsors are gonna be watching, so get out there and rock'em the way only *you* can! Trust me! Don't I take care of you and your family? That's my Cosmic Boy!"

The truth is, I don't remember very much at all about my second win at the Cosmic Games. Oh, I remember every moment of every game with perfect crystal clarity. The strategy, the drive, reaching deep within for new vistas of control and power. But between the games there was nothing; almost as if I didn't exist. I remember trouncing Dryk Bron right off the court in Singles Competition. I'll never forget the exhausted empty look on his face when he shook my hand and walked defeated off the field of play. How could I forget? I'd seen the same look on my own face for a long time. But all the rest of it is kind of blurry.

I remember the feel of the winner's medal being slipped around my neck. I remember being dizzy gazing down from the heights of the Victory Platform suspended so high above the crowds. I remember finding a quiet corner of the stifling, noisy, overflowing hotel room rented for my victory celebration. I remember being so very, very tired ...

I woke up a week later on Medicus One, surrounded by brisk, efficient doctors who wouldn't let me see my frantic family but insisted on telling me some unpleasant truths. Doctor Tannhauser explained it best.

"If you don't stop and rest," he told me with a shake of his graying head, "you'll die. Can't get much simpler than that, son."

No, I guess you can't.

"Sure, sure," proclaimed Pippo, magnanimously, "take a few days off, kid! You've earned it! Just leave everything to your old friend Pippo, okay? I'm gonna take care of you!"

I didn't want to believe my Dad when he came to me about Pippo. But the evidence was sprocking near irrefutable. Right there it was in black and white. And red. Figures don't lie ... but liars certainly figure, I discovered.

"Pippo's been stealing money from you from the first, Rokk," Hu Krinn told me. I didn't want to hear it. "All the money that was supposedly going for 'team expenses'? Straight into his pocket. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of credits And it's all legal. We can't touch him." My dad was always much smarter than I am. I just kind of exploded.

They had to peel me off Pippo. I almost killed him. I don't think I've ever been more frightened of anything in my life than I was of that single, sickening moment when I thought he was dead. Understandably, he didn't press charges. He signed over a huge lump sum payment to me as "contract dissolution severance" and I never saw him in person again. But I made sure that word spread. It wasn't too long before Pippo didn't have any clients left. He was finally forced to flee Braal one step ahead of the SP's and the Tax Collection Agency. I hear he's running a carny somewhere in the Outer Magellenic Clouds. To his performers and carnival guests I say: You'd better count your fingers when he turns loose of your hand.

I went back home to Braal, sat down with my family, and took stock. There was a lot less left than you might think. The government ended up with most of it, of course. But there was enough for some breathing space. If we were careful the Krinn family was going to be pretty comfortable from here on out. I had at least accomplished that much. I did quite a bit of thinking in the next six months or so.

I thought about the injustice of it all a lot. The unfairness. My parents were born into a world of stifling poverty through no fault of their own. Simply because they were Braalian. They worked hard all their lives. But no matter how diligently they tried, no matter how valiantly they struggled, it did them no good. But for a freak of genetics that gave them a son with my abilities they'd have died as they were born: hungry. Where was the justice in that, I wondered?

I tried to have Pippo arrested and charged with fraud and embezzlement. But my Dad was right about that as he was right about so many other things. My lawyer explained to me in excoriating detail the technicalities that allowed Pippo to steal from me the money that I sweated and sacrificed for and (if the doctors were right) might even have taken years off my life to earn.

"But that's not right!" I shouted, pounding my fist on the syntho-Mahogany wood desk in frustration. "It's not fair! Is this justice?"

"No, Mr. Krinn," said the lawyer succinctly, clearly, as if to a dull-witted child, "that's the *law*."

When I reached my legal Braalian majority of fourteen I went looking for ... something. I wasn't sure what. I told myself that I just wanted some peace and quiet; some place to belong. The Immigration officer didn't recognize me. When he asked me why I was going to Earth I told him the first thing that came to mind. "I'm looking for work. Maybe a job in heavy industry." Dutifully, he recorded it and promptly forgot me. I was only one of thousands, after all.

When the young blond girl in the SP Cadet's uniform cried out, "Stop those men! They're planning to assassinate R.J. Brande!" I'm not sure why I reacted so quickly. There were other Braalians there who stood by idly and did nothing. But the tall red-headed guy stopped the would-be assassins in their tracks while I brought the house down on them. And you know what? It felt good. I felt *right*.

"By damn!" cried a grateful R. J. Brande, his fluffy white walrus mustache aquiver with delight, "you kids were magnificent! By damn!"

One thing I discovered right away about R. J. He let's no dust gather in his shadow. When he makes up his mind to something he acts immediately. Less than twenty four hours later, he had the three of us in his office explaining in detail his plans for the formation of what he called the "Legion of Super-Heroes".

"There are super powered young people all over the United Planets," he declared. "With your help I'm going to bring some of them together; make them an official agency of the UP, an adjunct to the Science Police. And I want you three to be the founders, the core. We'll build around you."

The three of us discussed Mr. Brande's offer late into the night before we made up our minds. Imra was halfway convinced before R. J. even made us the offer. Of course. No big surprise for a telepath of her skill. Garth ... Garth wasn't sure. But I knew exactly what I wanted.

"I don't know, guys ... " Garth rubbed the back of his neck in contemplation. "I - uh - sorta came to Earth for a reason ... My brother Mekt ... " I didn't let him finish.

"Listen!" I cried, "this is a chance for us to *do* something! To mean something! How often does a chance like that come along? Mr. Brande wants us to help people, to make things right. To see that justice is done. We can't let an opportunity like that pass us by, we can't!" My mouth was dry as Arrakian sand and my heart raced faster than it ever had on any magno ball court. I wanted this Legion of Super-Heroes to become a reality more than I ever wanted anything in my life. My blood burned with the need for it. I had to convince them. I *had* to.

"Well, we're just three kids, for grife's sake," protested Garth, "what can *we* do?"

"Whatever we can," returned Imra simply, her quiet voice somehow filling all the spaces in the huge hotel room we occupied. After a moment, before the silence could reach out and swallow us, I put my hand on Garth's shoulder.

"Do you like beaches?" I asked him. He frowned in puzzlement.

"Sure," he replied, "but what's that got to do with -"

"I love beaches," I interrupted him. "Just before I left to come to Earth, I went walking on a beach. I was kind of ... lost, I guess. Didn't know what to do with myself. The beach was covered with coralfish, swept in by the tide. And there was a ragged old man walking along ahead of me. Every so often he'd reach down pick up a coral fish and toss it back into the sea. 'They'll die on the land if they don't get back to the ocean,' he explained. I looked around at all the dying coralfish. 'But there are *hundreds* of them,' I pointed out. 'You can't save them all. What difference does it make?' The old guy reached down, picked up another coralfish and flung it back into the safety of the sea. 'Made a difference to *that* one,' he said."

For long moments Garth just stared at me, but when I saw Imra smile I knew I had won.

"Grife," Garth shook his head, trying to decide between amusement and anger, "Did you ever think about being a politician, buddy?"

The next day when we accepted R. J.'s offer, the Legion of Super-Heroes was born. And Rokk Krinn was reborn.

I've been here ever since.

I'm still not sure just how the Legion became home. I'm stunned when I realize that I've spent almost half my life here, with these people. From the first, Garth and I connected. Winathians are so predisposed to the idea of being twins, of always having someone close to you around, that I suppose it was inevitable that the two of us would become fast, life-long friends. His twin sister Ayla was still on Winath with their parents. Lightning Lass didn't join the Legion until later. I suppose Garth was lonely without her. I know I was lonely without my family. I meant to bring them to Earth to join me, I swear I did. But everything was so hectic in the beginning ... And after the first several time the Legion was attacked, I convinced myself that it wasn't safe for them here.

Imra intimidated the hell out of me, at first. It took me a long time to get to know her, but it was worth the trouble I took. Imra is ... cautious. I can't imagine what it must be like for her. All those voices in her head ... all the time ... It's a miracle she's still sane. And that's not an exaggeration, either. More than a few Alpha class telepaths, aren't, you know. Saturn Queen, for example. Saturn Girl's discipline and training make her formidable. She doesn't reveal herself easily at all. She makes you work for every glimpse of her you get. That's what makes those rare glimpses so special, though.

Don't ask me how, but right from the start Garth had her number. His blithe assumption that Imra was just like any other young girl was refreshing for her, I think. He turned out to be right, too. Garth fell in love with Imra from the moment he first saw her and that's never changed. So did Imra, really. It just took Garth a bit to convince her of it, that's all. Over the years I've watched them date, fight and make up, marry and become parents, then lose one of their children to Darkseid's cold evil. I've grieved with them, celebrated with them and fought with them. When we thought Garth was dead I was willing to sacrifice my life to bring him back. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

I've watched the Legion grow from just the three of us to more than two dozen past and present members. And everyone one of them deserving of the name hero. It's funny. There have been so many battles, so many enemies ... an almost endless parade of them. And yet, when I look back on it all, it's the quiet times I remember the best; the little things. The first time I ever heard Brainy make a joke. Or the first time I ever heard Element Lad, Jan Arrah, laugh. Mon-El's smile. Refereeing a game of Dungeons and Dragons between Sun Boy and Timber Wolf. And I'm not likely to ever forget the look in Phantom Girl's eye the first time she saw Ultra Boy. Or vice versa. Poor Jo looked like he'd been hit with an exploding nova bomb.

Lydda says they're going to have to use anti-matter to pry me out of this chair around the Main Legion Conference Table. I guess she's right. Space knows, I tried to leave once. It didn't work out. I was back almost before I left. For the first two terms I was the Legion Leader and I guess in some small ways I've never stepped down from that job. To most Legionnaires, I'm sure I'll always be the 'grand old man' of the Legion. The one everyone looks to for advice. Hey! I'm not *that* old, okay? But I do the best I can.

Jan was frightened when he found he'd been elected Leader, but he tried so hard to be strong and confident. All he needed, though, was an opportunity to shine. I never had any doubts about his leadership and I told him so. I guess it worked, because Jan was one of the best Leaders the Legion ever had. Nura, on the other hand ... I wasn't so sanguine about. Dream Girl definitely did not fit my idea of a Leader for any organization much less the Legion. All right, so I underestimated her by several light years. Turned out, there was quite a brain under all platinum blond hair and self absorption. It just need a focus that's all.

The Legion has been through a lot of changes and so have I. But one thing that's never changed is my passion to see justice done. Nobody can be Cosmic Boy forever, though.

But as long as the Legion stands for justice and the protection of the innocent ... I'm going to try.

The End

End
file.